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## TRUE AND FALSE PROPHETS IN 1 KINGS, CHAP. 22

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THE terms "true" and "false," as applied to the prophets of the Old Testament, serve to distinguish those whom the Bible approves from those whom it does not approve. Yet few, it may be, of those who use these terms in this general sense have considered the question wherein consists the trueness of the one class and the falseness of the other. With many the readiest answer would be that the false prophets were those whose predictions did not come to pass. Others would say that the false prophets were those who were not commissioned of God to speak for him. Still others would make the distinction to be that the true prophets tried to teach the people the truth, while the false prophets wilfully tried to deceive them.

To the people of Old Testament times this was not a question of merely academic interest, but one of vital importance; for these prophets were their contemporaries, to whom they had to look for practical guidance in political and spiritual things. They could not, as some champions of inspiration in these days profess to be able to do, accept a "thus saith the Lord" as an all-sufficient criterion of the true prophet, because they knew that every claimant to the prophetic office in those times used this same introductory formula (1 Kings 22:11; Jer. 23:30-40), and that Moabite and Assyrian monarchs were quite as prone to hear a divine calling in their own patriotic and personal inclinations as any Hebrew king or prophet.

It is not strange, therefore, that we find in the Bible more than one attempt to give the people some test by which they might know the true prophet from the false. We read in Deut. 18:21, 22: "And if thou say in thine heart, How shall we know the word which the Lord hath not spoken? When a prophet speaketh in the name of the Lord, if the thing follow not, nor

come to pass, that is the thing which the Lord hath not spoken: the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously, thou shalt not be afraid of him." Evidently, such a criterion is, at best, only a negative one, and applies only when a prophet is willing to stake his reputation on the fulfilment of a definite prediction. Moreover, if the prediction be ambiguous or its fulfilment be put far into the future, it is of little use to a man wanting to know his immediate duty. The form implies also, though not with absolute necessity, the converse—that, if the thing come to pass, the predictor may then be regarded as a true prophet. But, obviously, an impostor could hardly fail to hit right in some of his shrewd guesses.

The Deuteronomist himself saw this and felt the need of some further limitation in the test. Accordingly, in 13:1-3, he gives this additional rule: "If there arise in the midst of thee a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams, and he give thee a sign or a wonder, and [read, *even though*] the sign or the wonder come to pass, whereof he spake unto thee, saying, Let us go after other gods, which thou hast not known, and let us serve them; thou shalt not hearken unto that prophet or that dreamer of dreams." To the former test of clairvoyance there is here added an ethical one. The character and purpose of the would-be prophet must be looked at in their relation to certain ultimate principles of the divine law. If those principles were already embodied in written form, we have here something closely parallel to the appeal which the Protestant reformers made from the pope and the councils to the Scriptures; and in the positiveness of it, it is surpassed only by Paul's demand that, though he himself or an angel from heaven should preach any other gospel than that which he has already preached, let him be anathema (Gal. 1:8). To the ordinary mind, such an appeal from Paul future to Paul past would be rather confusing; and to the man of Old Testament times, if he reflected that the law was given by Moses, it might have been equally difficult to choose between a prophet long since dead and one who was now making predictions fulfilled before his very eyes.

It is plain, however, that in substituting an ethical test for

mere success in prediction and miracle-working, the Deuteronomist has come to higher ground, and a time-honored law may reasonably command greater respect than the claims of some upstart prophet. Superior powers for wonder-working were valuable in ancient times as introductory credentials. Jesus himself did not disdain to make use of them. But a right moral purpose was a *sine qua non* of the true prophet.

Nevertheless, even a right moral purpose does not of itself constitute a man a true prophet. Beyond this it is necessary that he be correct in the great underlying premises of his prophecies, and by the correctness of these must his work ultimately stand or fall.

No better text for a study of such premises and purposes can be found in the Bible than the chapter (1 Kings, chap. 22) in which the so-called false prophets encouraged Ahab to go up against Ramoth-gilead. Judged by the outcome of the campaign, they certainly were false prophets, and, by the same test, Micaiah ben-Imlah was a true prophet. But it is hardly fair to let Micaiah go down in history as a true prophet, and to condemn all the other four hundred as false solely on the ground of their attitude in the one and only incident in which they are known to us. Why may it not have been a successful hit on Micaiah's part? What reason have we to suppose that he was equally happy in all his attempts to forecast the future? All else that we know of him is what we have on Ahab's testimony (vs. 8), that Micaiah had always been, like the proverbial Irishman, "agin the government." As the party "in opposition," he must often, as Ahab implies, have met the king's plans with prophecies of evil. Yet Ahab throughout his reign had been what we would call, from a political point of view, a successful man. He had bound to himself by matrimonial alliance the king of Sidon; and by the marriage of his daughter with the son of Jehoshaphat he had ended the wars between Judah and Israel which previous dynasties had kept alive since the disruption; and, in spite of the opposition and maledictions of certain of the Jehovah prophets, he seemed in a fair way to secure a reunion of the two kingdoms under a descendant of both David and Omri (2 Kings 8:18).

He had been defeated by the Assyrians at Karkar, it is true, but, what was of far more importance to him, he had been uniformly successful against his nearer enemy, Ben-hadad of Syria, and was able to command the tribute of Moab. It would seem that Micaiah's predictions must often have been wide of the mark and those of the four hundred successful. Moreover, the mass of the people were so subservient to Ahab that he had been able to transgress the ancient laws of landed inheritance with impunity.

What, now, were the grounds on which the four hundred ventured to predict success at Ramoth-gilead? We may reasonably believe them to have been such as the following:

1. There were some whose principle in predicting was to say the agreeable thing whenever there was an even chance of its proving correct.

2. There were those whose principle was to prophesy whichever way seemed likely to pay best in physical convenience. They had no liking for a dungeon and a bread-and-water diet.

3. There were those who always made it a point to be found in the majority. In this case, perhaps for reasons we shall consider later, the majority was overwhelmingly in favor of the war.

4. Some, who otherwise would have condemned the project, seeing that a large majority were in favor of it, and moved by what is often considered a praiseworthy desire for harmony, voted "to make it unanimous" (vs. 13). The above classes of men have no claim to be called true prophets.

5. Some who at heart, perhaps, doubted the expediency of the plan, saw that Ahab was bent on going anyway, and, believing that courage is half the battle, would do what they could to give him this initial advantage. These were the opportunists. They came nearer to being true prophets. They meant well and tried to make the best of the situation.

6. There were those who favored the campaign from a sense of justice. As the result of the last war, Ben-hadad had promised to give back to Ahab the cities that his father had taken from Ahab's father (1 Kings 20:34). Ramoth-gilead was one of these. But three years had now passed (22:1), and Ben-hadad had not yet complied with this item in the treaty. It was

time to use forcible measures. Those who agreed with the king in this were the idealists. Let justice be done though the heavens fall.

7. Finally, there were the philosophical theologians, constituting the responsible nucleus of the four hundred. They were guided in their forecasts of the future by certain great principles of divine providence, as they understood it, which constituted their philosophy of life. Chief among these principles was one that figures prominently in Old Testament thought: the belief that righteousness has its reward in material and temporal prosperity, with its natural corollary that material prosperity is an evidence of divine favor. Ahab, as we have noted above, had been a successful man. According to this philosophy, therefore, he was a favorite son of fortune, and there was no reason to suppose that the divine favor was now to be withdrawn. "Nothing succeeds like success," is our modern way of putting it. Ahab could not but be successful. Go up, therefore, to Ramoth-gilead and prosper.

Such were some of the grounds on which the four hundred favored the king's purpose. And they were false prophets, not because they intentionally advised the king contrary to his best interests, nor because they falsely claimed to be inspired of God, for the narrative itself regards them as in some sense his agents in the affair; nor because the outcome was different from what they predicted. But they were false prophets because the grounds on which they made their predictions were false.

Why, on the other hand, should we call Micaiah a true prophet? Not because this one of his many predictions came true, nor because he alone prefaced his words with a "thus saith the Lord," nor because he was more sincere in his belief as to what the outcome would be. It was rather for this, that he had got hold of a more correct and fundamental principle of divine government than these others, namely that, notwithstanding all appearances to the contrary, a righteous God cannot in the long run favor a wicked man, and such a man Micaiah believed Ahab to be. On this principle he had consistently predicted evil for Ahab throughout his career. We do not know how often these

predictions may have been defeated in specific cases before now. We have shown that Ahab was in a measure justified by his past successes in discrediting Micaiah's auguries of evil. But in the long run Micaiah's principle, that a righteous God cannot favor a wicked man, stands in the same class with the dictum of Socrates, that "there can no evil befall a good man, whether he be alive or dead." These are eternal principles of divine government, and he who prophesies on these principles is a true prophet, however remote or infrequent may be the fulfilments of his specific predictions.

Various ages and different social orders have had their several principles of prophecy. The same half-truth, that temporal prosperity betokens the favor of God, which drove Ahab to his death at Ramoth-gilead, was the ground of that fatal enthusiasm under Jeroboam II. for a coming great day of Jehovah, which the prophet Amos with truer foresight declared was to be a day of darkness and not of light. Napoleon's working principle was that God is on the side of the heaviest battalions, but the heaviest battalions came unexpectedly upon a deep trench in the field of Waterloo, and God was found to be on the other side. The papist believes in the infallibility of councils; the monarchist holds to the divine right of kings and that the king can do no wrong; the democrat interprets the voice of the people as the voice of God.

The prophets among us today are often divided on our great political and social questions; some seek leadership from insincere and selfish motives, but a great many on both sides are honestly trying to promote righteousness. Time only can show which of these latter are the true prophets; for, while the true prophet must preach what he believes to be the truth, uninfluenced by any considerations of what will please others or profit himself, and must accept no man's conscience as a substitute for his own, and must be ready to go on a diet of bread and water for a testimony to his sincerity—above and beyond all these, he must have laid hold of the eternal principles of divine government, and whole truths, not half-truths, must be the basis of his preaching.